MUSIC AND THE SPANISH-SPEAKING BLIND

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ALEJANDRO MEZA

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By Alejandro Meza.

To the Editors: Your idea of bringing to the knowledge of the readers of the "Musical Review" the facts marking the evolution of the musical movement among the blind all over the world, involves a policy which deserves the greatest credit. At your kind request, I have the privilege to present the following brief sketch, with the object of summarizing the main features of the musical situation among the blind belonging to the Spanish-Speaking World.

Unfortunately, whenever matters relating to the blind of the Spanish-speaking peoples are to be dealt with, the first thing we have to consider is the neglect which has prevailed so far as their education is concerned. In speaking of these blind, I do not only refer to the Latin-American countries, but naturally Spain is also included, for there is a close racial and cultural affinity between Spanish-America and the mother-country. As a matter of fact, the blind of this important portion of humanity, have been far less fortunate than those of other American and European nations, where the great problem of blindness has received a very deep and serious consideration, and where huge financial and technical resources have been employed in carrying out educational work and social care for the sightless. However, there are some interesting facts to be pointed out in connection with the special subject of Music as an art so broadly cultivated by blind persons of our race.

In Spain, as well as in Argentine, Chile and Mexico, the work for the blind was initiated many years ago, and of late, in Uruguay, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador and Cuba, similar work has begun. It is regretable that there are no records of this kind of activity in regard to the other

Central and South American countries; and, even in some of the parts of our continent already mentioned, work for the blind is barely in its infancy, and no general results can yet be quoted. In all countries referred to above there is at least one institution which can be considered as a center where some instruction is given to the blind. In the majority of these schools, the teaching of music is a matter of major importance. Nevertheless, in general terms, this teaching has not been imparted under scientific principles, but merely as an application of the erroneous conception of deeming the blind as naturally gifted and richly endowed for music. Although this misconception has commonly manifested itself everywhere, the conviction that this belief is absolutely false is fortunately spreading more and more.

In the year 1870, the great philanthropist, Igancio Trigueros, founded in Mexico City a school for the blind. In spite of the rudimentary and imperfect means used in training during that early period, the blind students of this incipient school made remarkable progress in music. These pupils formed an orchestra which was celebrated and recognized by the public as one of the first, if not the first, ensembles of its kind then existing in the Mexican metropolis. After several years this school was nationalized, and thenceforth the institution began to decay, and this falling down has continued until the present. Recently it has been officially announced that this school will be reorganized under strictly scientific principles and will be given a modern orientation. When these reforms become effectual, it is to be hoped that a musical program of teaching will be thoroughly studied and built up in such a manner as to guarantee satisfactory results in the future.

In Mexico many blind have found in music the only means of self-support; some others have become music teachers, and a few have reached a high standard in this art. Of course, many more would have attained success

if the lack of good training, adequate preparation and suitable didactic material would have not prevented them to accomplish their aspirations. The invasion of mechanical music, as well as the advent of the radio, restricted considerably the field of the professional musicians, and this restriction affected proportionately (as it had unavoidably to happen) the blind players.

On the other hand, several years ago, the Ignacio Trigueros Association came into existence. This is the only organization carrying on a nation-wide work, its main activity for the present being the embossing of books. This Association has just finished the edition in Spanish braille of the Manual of the Staff Notation, originally published by the Perkins Institution for the Blind. Within a short time this work will be entirely ready for distribution.

In Argentine the National Institution for the Blind at Buenos Aires, has devoted preferential attention to the teaching of music. Also in that republic many blind have become professional musicians, and some have become artists in the full sense of the word, having excelled as pianists, violinists, cellists, etc. But owing to the radio, the talkies, etc., they have met the same difficulties as those of other countries.

Of all the countries that I am concerned with herein, perhaps Spain is where work for the blind in general has reached the most advanced stage. This is true, not only because of the number of schools and institutions existing there, but also on account of the action taken by the government toward the study and solution of the problems confronting the sightless. In those schools music is preferentially included in the teaching programs. Besides the braille system, in Spain is used to some extent the so-called "Abreu System", which is a modification of braille itself. This modification consists of a combination of eight dots for each cell, instead of six. The method is unknown elsewhere, and its use is confined to Spain, and as stated

above, it is employed in addition to braille.

In Spain, also, many blind have earned their livelihood by the practice of music in one form or another. Some blind have excelled, even in the times prior to the foundation of the first schools for their education in Europe. Antonio de Cabezon was an eminent Spanish musician of the XVI century. He was appointed clavecinist, organist and composer of the royal chamber to the court of King Carlos V, and he held the same position for King Felipe II of Spain. Francisco de Salinas is the name of another glorious figure of the Spanish musical art of the XVI century. He was an outstanding organist, an excellent singer and an eminent composer, who held a high position as teacher of music in the University of Salamanca. And, finally, among our contemporaries, I will mention Zacarias Lopez Debesa, great concert-pianist and composer, upon whom recently was conferred the "MEDAL OF WORK" in a solemn and public ceremony which took place in Madrid.

In dealing with another aspect of this subject, I will mention the braille presses belonging to the following institutions: Colegio Nacional (National College for the Blind), Madrid, Spain; Instituto Catalan (Catalonian Institute for the Blind), Barcelona, Spain; Biblioteca Argentina (Argentine Libary for the Blind, Buenos Aires, and Ignacio Trigueros Association for the Blind, Mexico City, Mexico, D. F. Especially the Spanish presses have embossed a deal of music, and it is to be ardently desired and hoped that in the near future an intense co-operation of these publishing plants will be reached for the benefit of the Spanish-speaking blind. The co-operation with the rest of the world will then be easily attained, as the universality of music is a most favorable factor in this co-operation

In my opinion, to sum up, all workers for the blind must make the greatest effort to answer the needs of the present era of musical development, and to maintain always opened to the blind the realm of Music, both as a

splendid field of professional practice and as a precious and perennial source of consolation and hope.

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